

Donald Trump and Authoritarian Followers

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In 1998 I tried to explain why social scientists who are worried about our freedoms have focused on the crowd that would lift a dictator aloft rather than the autocrat himself.

“Wanna-be tyrants in a democracy are just comical figures on soapboxes when they have no following. So the real...threat lay coiled in parts of the population itself, it was thought, ready someday to catapult the next Hitler to power with their votes.”

That apprehension was well-founded, it turns out. Research suggests that 20-25% of the adults in North America are highly vulnerable to a demagogue who would incite hatred of various minorities to gain power. These people are waiting for a tough “man on horseback” who will supposedly solve all our problems through the ruthless application of force. When such a man gains prominence, you can expect the authoritarian followers to mate devotedly with the authoritarian leader, because each gives the other something they desperately want: the feeling of safety for the followers, and the tremendous power of the modern state for the leader.

I would not say that all of the people trying to carry Donald Trump to the presidency are authoritarian followers. But they likely compose his hard core base. Furthermore, many authoritarian followers presently support Senator Ted Cruz for religious reasons. You can expect most of them to slide into the Trump ranks once Cruz drops out of the race. By summer, the vast majority of authoritarian followers in the United States will likely be for Trump. And so will many others for various reasons.

We know a lot about authoritarian followers, but unfortunately most of what we know indicates it will be almost impossible to change their minds, especially in a few months. Here are a dozen things established by research.

- 1) They are highly ethnocentric, highly inclined to see the world as their in-group versus everyone else. Because they are so committed to their in-group, they are very zealous in its cause.
- 2) They are highly fearful of a dangerous world. Their parents taught them, more than parents usually do, that the world is dangerous. They may also be genetically predisposed to experiencing stronger fear than most people do.
- 3) They are highly self-righteous. They believe they are the “good people” and this unlocks a lot of hostile impulses against those they consider bad.
- 4) They are aggressive. Given the chance to attack someone with the approval of an authority, they will lower the boom.
- 5) They are highly prejudiced against racial and ethnic minorities, non-heterosexuals, and women in general.
- 6) Their beliefs are a mass of contradictions. They have highly compartmentalized minds, in which opposite beliefs exist side-by-side in adjacent boxes. As a result, their thinking is full of double-standards.
- 7) They reason poorly. If they like the conclusion of an argument, they don’t pay much attention to whether the evidence is valid or the argument is consistent.

8) They are highly dogmatic. Because they have gotten their beliefs mainly from the authorities in their lives, rather than think things out for themselves, they have no real defense when facts or events indicate they are wrong. So they just dig in their heels and refuse to change.

9) They are very dependent on social reinforcement of their beliefs. They think they are right because almost everyone they know, almost every news broadcast they see, almost every radio commentator they listen to, tells them they are. That is, they screen out the sources that will suggest that they are wrong.

10) Because they severely limit their exposure to different people and ideas, they vastly overestimate the extent to which other people agree with them. And thinking they are “the moral majority” supports their attacks on the “evil minorities” they see in the country.

11) They are easily duped by manipulators who pretend to espouse their causes when all the con-artists really want is personal gain.

12) They are largely blind to themselves. They have little self-understanding and insight into why they think and do what they do.

I hasten to add that almost anyone would become more ethnocentric, frightened, self-righteous, and so on if their situations, or our country’s situation, changed enough. And studies find examples of these twelve things in lots of others, not just authoritarian followers. But not as consistently, and not nearly as much.

If, as you went down this list of things experiments have discovered about authoritarian followers, you found yourself saying, “Yeah, you can sure see that in the Trump supporters,” and if you believe that a President Trump would be a very stiff test of democracy the United States, then what can you do—without becoming a highly ethnocentric person yourself?

Well, it’s not going to be easy changing highly aggressive, dogmatic, insular people who will dismiss you out of hand as “the enemy”? They have been that way for most of their lives, and they have built a lot of supports, including straight-out denial, to keep their views intact.

Authoritarian followers in America today are tremendously energized by fear and anger. They’re scared, and they want someone really strong and confident to protect them. It’s a very natural, understandable reaction. As well they’re intensely angry about the way their country is changing, and most pointedly furious with the Republican Party which has won many elections because of their support, and then utterly failed to “get things right again.” So they feel betrayed, and that is a very powerful motivator.

One suspects they will feel even more betrayed if Trump becomes president and turns out to have been conning them all along too. But he is going to keep telling them he’s one of them, and keep them scared and angry while selling himself as the Toughest Guy They Ever Met. Authoritarian followers are always waiting for The Leader, and now they firmly believe they’ve found him.

But let me not stoke *your* fears too high, for we do have to fear fear itself. There is a simple way out of this situation: Others can outvote them. But even though most of the American electorate says now that they would never vote for Trump, he’ll become the next President if those folks stay home on election day. If Trump’s opponents do not get as energized as Trump’s very loyal followers are, his supporters will carry him on their shoulders to the highest office in the land.

*Bob Altemeyer is a retired professor of psychology at the University of Manitoba in Canada. He studied authoritarianism for over forty years during his academic career. His research on authoritarian aggression won the Prize for Behavioral Science Research awarded by the American Association for the Advancement of Science. An accessible, non-technical presentation of his findings on authoritarian followers and leaders is available in *The Authoritarians*, a free online book available at home.cc.umanitoba.ca/~altemey/